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DVD'S 'Official' Comdex Launch Delayed - Again

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LAS VEGAS - Even as the promotional drumbeat begins for the launch of the digital video disc (DVD), hardware and software companies are still out of sync.

Comdex '96 last week was supposed to be something of a coming out party for the new video format after months of delays and negotiations on copy-protection issues.

Toshiba Corp. had invited more than 100 reporters and analysts to a press conference at Caesar's Palace to mark 'the official launch of DVD,' connected by satellite to a similar gathering in New York City.

In a press release, Toshiba promised that Warner Home Video president Warren Lieberfarb, the format's leading backer on the software side, would be on hand to make a 'special announcement,' presumably news about when the first movies would be available on DVD.

But Lieberfarb didn't show up. In fact, no one from Warner attended the press conference.

A Toshiba spokesperson said the release was a 'mistake.' Koji Hase, general manager of Toshiba's DVD Products Division, said the company wanted to focus the event on the launch of DVD-ROM drives, which will be shipped to manufacturers in January.

A spokesperson for Warner Home Video confirmed that Lieberfarb attended Comdex, but she said he was never officially invited and never planned to attend the scheduled press conference.

At the Toshiba press conference, dubbed 'DVD Launch 1996,' reporters expecting to hear definitive plans about the rollout of DVD players were told instead that Toshiba planned a 'first quarter of 1997' launch.

While DVD-ROM drives and other DVD products were prominently displayed throughout the convention, most manufacturers reiterated that no

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specific plans had yet been set for bringing the much-anticipated video format to market.

Toshiba marketing v.p. Steve Nickerson confirmed that hardware manufacturers and the Hollywood studios still have a fundamental difference of opinion about how to launch the product.

Hardware companies are accustomed to bringing out new products slowly, introducing them in selected markets with a few retailers, he said. But Hollywood usually wants to make a big splash, giving new product to all its retailers at the same time.

Toshiba is trying to encourage studios to introduce product in 'a way they are not used to,' he said.

While no one was talking about specific launch plans, more movies were in evidence at the show. Attendees caught DVD clips of Warner's Batman Forever, Tin Cup, A Time to Kill and Executive Decision; MCA/Universal Home Video's Apollo 13, Waterworld and Casino; and LIVE Home Video's CUTTHROAT ISLAND.

Despite the lack of Hollywood representatives, Toshiba executives repeated over and over again that software was the key to making DVD a success.

'Hardware and machines are not relevant here' compared to the importance of the software in making DVD successful, Hase said.

During the press conference, Toshiba previewed a new television commercial, set to air whenever DVD launches. It shows a family sitting in their living room being blasted by the audio and video quality of the DVD player with the slogan, 'You've got senses ... use them.'

In his speech, Nickerson addressed his closing remarks to 'our friends' with software companies.

'Now is the time for DVD,' he said.

----- INDEX REFERENCES -----

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